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# Identity conveyance through multimedia: Kat Blaque's transformative narrative using Draw My Life

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**Identity conveyance through multimedia: Kat Blaque's transformative narrative using  
Draw My Life**

by

**Mariah Kemp**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:  
Margaret La Ware, Major Professor  
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Iowa State University

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## NOMENCLATURE

DML

Draw My Life

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## ABSTRACT

The shifting landscape of digital environments today situates rhetorical scholars within complex intersections. Converging concepts in narrative, genre, multimodal composition, and social media beckon scholars to examine the fluctuating power dynamics of the Internet. With this in mind, this thesis explores the rise of narratives in blogs, YouTube as a platform for new media, and the Draw My Life tag on YouTube. By comparing Draw My Life to previous definitions of blogs, this thesis argues that Draw My Life is its own genre and a tool for users to solidify their identities and experiences using multimedia. Using Kat Blaque's Draw My Life video as a case study compared to other submissions in the tag, this thesis also seeks to understand how Blaque's narrative challenges the power dynamics in contemporary visuals through her submission.

As a transgender woman, Blaque retains significant authority over her identity through her submission by guiding her audience's perceptions. Her video represents a powerful way for voices who are traditionally marginalized to use multimedia to share and preserve their identities and personal histories.

Keywords: narrative, identity, power, social media, YouTube, Draw My Life, visual rhetoric, genre theory, comics, LGBTQ, intersectional

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The shifting landscape of digital environments today situates rhetorical scholars within complex intersections. Converging concepts in narrative, genre, multimodal composition, and social media beckon scholars to examine the fluctuating power dynamics of the Internet. Research, then, must work to understand power and communication within those evolving digital spaces, and it must not take for granted the opportunities for newly empowered voices to thrive. With this in mind, I explore the rise of narratives in blogs, YouTube as a platform for new media, and a particular category of video on YouTube.

#### Blogging as a New Narrative Form

Psychologists have argued that “stories about one's experiences, and the experiences of others, are the fundamental constituents of human memory, knowledge, and social communication” (Schank and Abelson). Today we have the fundamental and prehistoric tools of verbal and visual communication, yet almost half the population of the world also has access to the Internet (*ITU*)—a tool undeniably central to modern communication. The digital environment of the Internet invites users to venture through extensive content, and among this content is the narrative. Taking many shapes, narratives appear on social media, in YouTube videos, and are wildly diverse. In the 1990s, narratives erupted through online blogs.

Researchers have used blogging as a lens with which to study digital environments, in particular the “psychology of the Internet.” Laura J. Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic, in “The Psychology of Blogging,” come to the conclusion that “Blogs illustrate the fusion of key

elements of human desire—to express one’s identity, create community, structure one’s past and present experiences—with the main technological features of 21st century digital communication” (67). They argue that weblogs are “both a technology and a genre,” as blog “conventions are standardized” and “invoke certain forms of discourse and shape the outcome of the text” (61). Blogs, then, are indicators not only of the self, but of the Internet, and arguably the world, at a point in time.

In “Blogging as Social Action,” Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd examine “the peculiar intersection of the public and private that weblogs seem to invite” (1). The authors consider the purpose and function of blogs, arguing that “the blog is a new rhetorical opportunity, made possible by technology” (1), which allows for “a contemporary contribution to the art of the self” (15). Because blogging occurs when a creator digitally publishes their own content for an audience to consume, bloggers control their self-images and the information that is released about them. What is placed on display by a blogger may then be viewed, read, or heard by the audience. This display of information or “self” also addresses complexities with agency and power, which this thesis examines in-depth.

Gurak and Antonijevic investigate what Miller and Shepherd note about the public and private boundaries of blogs. Gurak and Antonijevic further this idea by saying:

The character of blogs as simultaneously private and public enables the formation of both individual and group identities. Through extensive narratives and often highly personal descriptions of day-to-day activities, and through the use of images, a blogger reveals and creates—intentionally or not—his or her unique online identity. (64)

But what Miller and Shepherd's article does not adequately address, and perhaps never anticipated, is the recent rise of video blogging, or "vlogging," which takes the concept of blogging and turns it into a primarily video-based form. Gurak and Antonijevic acknowledge the video-sharing website, YouTube, in their article and consider it the "video incarnation of blogging" (66), and Miller and Shepherd make note that "videoblogs" exist (7). While vlogs can be hosted anywhere online that has video hosting capabilities, YouTube is arguably the most popular video-sharing website. Miller and Shepherd's article was published in 2004, so it is understandable that they would not tackle YouTube, as the site was only being conceptualized at the time of the authors' publication. Throughout this thesis, YouTube is considered the primary platform for distribution of video blogs.

### Introducing the Draw My Life Tag

In January of 2013, a new trending tag swept through YouTube—this was the launch of the Draw My Life tag. Creators uploaded videos of themselves drawing their life stories. Draw My Life started much like a meme, as YouTube creators began to latch onto the tag and upload their own narratives. That summer, feminist blogger and animator Kat Blaque recorded her version of the Draw My Life tag. As a transgender black woman, Blaque's contribution to the video genre details her life growing up "different" from the friends around her. Blaque uses animation to represent her intersectional identity and compose her narrative through a digital platform, similar to that of the other Draw My Life tag contributors. While each of these narratives incorporates emotion and experience to connect with viewers, Blaque's complex and distinct narrative separates her from her fellow vloggers and presents an opportunity to examine the intricacies of her narrative.

In “Genre as Social Action,” Miller acknowledges the natural cycle of genres, in that “Genres change, evolve, and decay” (163). This dynamism of genres is later reaffirmed in *Emerging Genres in New Media Environments*, as Miller supports “the development of new analytical methods for new media genres” because “new media are dynamic and multimodal” (21). Although genres continue to emerge at an immeasurable pace, nevertheless researchers must actively work toward understanding rapidly evolving new medias that utilize those genres. New medias break from traditional texts, and they allow users who might not normally have the platform to share their voices.

Barry Brummett’s *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* tackles the issue of power dynamics in traditional texts, stating that “Traditional texts both include and exclude people from the management of public business and thus from positions of power” (Brummett 13). While the creators of the DML videos express deeply personal issues, their narratives are not entirely their own. No matter what issues the video creators present (e.g. anxiety, bullying, transitioning), there will always be someone able to identify with one or more of those experiences presented. Therefore, while blogs, vlogs, and DML videos are not traditional texts, they are nevertheless important, as they allow people who may not be traditionally “in power” to amplify their voices and control their messages.

Blaque’s video breaks from normative standards because its narrative follows the development of gender in a transgender individual and as a result, shows how transitioning can be a source of empowerment and survival. Consider a statistic from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey Report, which found that among transgender individuals, “Forty percent (40%) have attempted suicide *in their lifetime*, nearly nine times the rate in the U.S. population (4.6%).” The mental health of transgender people is at a severe disadvantage, stemming from lack of

community acceptance, health care, resources, and more. In “Trans on YouTube,” Laura Horak writes, “YouTube’s predilection for the personal and the spectacular have made it a powerful tool for some trans people to construct the ways that their bodies are looked at and heard—and to connect geographically disparate people in intimate ways. To put it bluntly, these videos save trans lives” (581). YouTube remains a space for anyone to broadcast their thoughts, desires, opinions, and experiences, but the video-sharing site has deeper implications. Knowing that trans lives are at stake, we can begin to see how a platform that allows those lives to be seen and heard is significant. Horak continues, “Distributed freely through the Internet and easily found, they collectively tell trans youth that self-determination and transformation are viable routes. They also generate forms of intimacy between vlogger and viewer that solicit desire, empathy, and emulation” (581). The intimacy of which Horak writes connects to Gurak and Antonijevic’s “public and private” conception of the blog, which seeks to build connections and identifications between bloggers and their audience members. In order to understand the genre of Draw My Life videos and the power of Blaque’s vlog, I provide a brief history of YouTube.

### A Brief History of YouTube

YouTube began in 2005, and while the site creators had a basic goal for it to be used as a video-sharing site, it quickly evolved as more users began to submit content (Cloud). Users of MySpace, a social media website akin to Facebook which has since lost its popularity, used the early form of YouTube to link video content to their MySpace. Thus, as MySpace’s popularity and use grew, so did YouTube (Cloud). Today, YouTube extends that original ability of creating content and uploading to the site—not only can creators upload, but businesses can advertise on those videos if the creator decides to monetize their videos. What began as a free video-sharing

site has transformed into a complex system of creation, advertising, monetization, and viewer feedback, as users with YouTube accounts may comment on videos and creator channels.

Though YouTube's original goals might not match what their goals are today, it is important to consider the values offered by YouTube on their "About" page. The video-sharing site boasts of four "essential freedoms that define who we are," tangentially related to their mission statement:

Freedom of Expression - We believe people should be able to speak freely, share opinions, foster open dialogue, and that creative freedom leads to new voices, formats and possibilities.

Freedom of Opportunity - We believe everyone should have a chance to be discovered, build a business and succeed on their own terms, and that people—not gatekeepers—decide what's popular.

Freedom of Information - We believe everyone should have easy, open access to information and that video is a powerful force for education, building understanding, and documenting world events, big and small.

Freedom to Belong - We believe everyone should be able to find communities of support, break down barriers, transcend borders and come together around shared interests and passions. (About YouTube)

These freedoms will be important to understand, as this essay will explore how these freedoms play out in the Draw My Life tag, particularly in terms of breaking down barriers and finding communities of support.

## YouTube Tags

YouTube allows anyone with a Google mail account to host videos on the YouTube website. In “Looking at, with, and through YouTube,” Paul A. Soukup examines the uses of the video-sharing site, declaring a number of broad categories: a) advertising, b) archival work, c) education, d) entertainment, e) journalism, f) political communication, and a final broad category of g) other uses—including cat videos, art and culture, religion, etc. (11-23). Soukup describes YouTube as “an accidental repository of billions of videos and, more deliberately, a film and video archive” (12).

Limited by certain parameters (such as original content, or paying royalties to copyrighted content), video creators, or vloggers (an abbreviation of “video bloggers”), set up a channel and then upload videos. These videos use several features that enable viewers to find them. Viewers and subscribers (viewers who follow the channel’s content so that it shows within the subscriber’s feed) do not have to pay for these videos. YouTube’s current design allows subscribers to opt-in to receive notifications every time a channel they are subscribed to uploads a new video. Otherwise, videos are arranged into broad categories. One obvious feature is the video title, and another feature is the channel name itself. Channel names do not necessarily reflect the name of the creators, as explored later. Creators may give the video a description, which appears below the video for all viewers to see. A more hidden tagging feature allows viewers to search for specific content using keywords. When uploading a video, creators are allowed to name the video, give a description, and add tags. These tags do not appear any longer to viewers, though viewers will, theoretically, find a video with the search function if they use the correct keywords attached to that video.



YouTube tags, in addition to signaling key topics within a video (such as “tutorial,” “DIY,” or “Harry Potter”), connect creators to one another. This commonly occurs as a “challenge” tag. One example of such a tag is the “Try Not to Laugh” challenge, which challenges viewers to watch a series of funny videos to see how long it takes them laugh. These challenges spread via the YouTube tags, as well as the descriptions and video titles. The Draw My Life tag is one such challenge, though it appears to be less of a challenge and more of a tool to connect YouTube creators through their personal narratives. This tag is not to be confused with the YouTube channel, Draw My Life, which broadcasts hand-drawn videos of biographies of celebrities, news, and other historical people. The Draw My Life channel draws the lives of *others*, rather than themselves.

There is some discrepancy about how the Draw My Life tag began. When comparing the search phrases “draw my life” and “draw my life YouTube” on Google Trends, there is mention of “draw my life” in 2011, yet “draw my life YouTube” does not surge until early 2013. The website *Know Your Meme* considers the tag a meme started in January 2013 by Sam Pepper, a YouTube star and former *Big Brother* television contestant. However, Brian O’Reilly, an Irish singer, is also credited as the inventor of the Draw My Life tag. O’Reilly’s video is available on YouTube, but only if you have the direct link to it, otherwise it remains hidden. However, O’Reilly’s DML submission shows a timestamp of May 25, 2013, which also means it was uploaded after Pepper’s video. Thus, this thesis will examine Pepper’s DML submission rather than O’Reilly’s, and will explain their differences during Chapter 2, *Constructing the Genre*.

## The Powerful Implications of Social Media and YouTube

Hashtags enable the defining and framing of communities on YouTube and other social media outlets. As Alice R. Daer, Rebecca F. Hoffman, and Seth Goodman define hashtags as a “communicative genre” in their ethnographic exploration of hashtag use across social media, they write, “From a rhetorical perspective, metacommunicative hashtags should be viewed as ‘communicative genres’ in the sense that they are dynamic, interactive functions of designed software being appropriated by users for tacit, recurring purposes of meaning-making within and across social technologies” (14). Therefore, the use of hashtags found on social media websites such as Twitter and Instagram enables users to connect through their self-selected tags. This re-emphasizes Gurak and Antonijevic’s points about individual and group identities. As an individual chooses to write a particular tag about their experience, it simultaneously connects the individual to other users.

Through these tags and other descriptors, YouTube has evolved as a video-sharing website to a platform of possibilities, especially for people seeking communities for support and affirmation. For example, in recent years, researchers have noted the video-sharing platform is a useful site for trans people to interact, inform, and support each other. Horak explores this phenomenon. She posits, “For the first time, media created by trans people is being produced, distributed, and consumed on a mass scale” (572), indicating that YouTube is a critical space for non-normative and marginalized identities to amplify their voices. Critics have argued, though, that these distributed trans vlogs maintain a monotonous form. In opposition to the critics, Horak grants that “While the strong conventions of transition videos may create the impression of monotony, these conventions have made the videos easier to create and circulate than any previous media form, and the experiences shared by vloggers can vary significantly” (574).

Horak's article looks primarily at trans vlogs in the shape of video diaries and/or "talking heads," where the vlogger sits in front of a camera, relatively "close" to the audience. She does continue her examination of trans videos by looking at "retrospective slideshows," which depict the passage of time through images or photographs of the trans person's transition. It is this form of video—the montage—that most closely resembles the Draw My Life YouTube tag.

What this literature demonstrates is the intersectional points between emerging communications, platforms, and sites of tension: narrative and blogging, the public and the private, multimedia and social media, visibility and agency...among others. The burgeoning field of social justice rhetoric has already acknowledged these intersections many times over. To situate myself within this scholastic conversation, I offer a new application of genre and visual theory through a case study of artifacts that embody these intersections.

First my thesis defines the genre of the Draw My Life video by examining five videos that exemplify the genre. These five particular videos were chosen for several reasons. Two of these YouTubers are men, while three of them are women. Another reason I chose them is because there is a wide variance in the channel focuses—fashion and beauty; gaming, "geeky baking" and do-it-yourself tutorials; pranks; internet humor; and social justice, activism, and LGBTQ+. These channels focus on different topics, yet they all share a common desire to tell their narrative. These creators are popular as well. Most of these creators have over one million channel subscribers, and even when their subscriber count is lower, there is still obvious proof that people are invested in listening to their stories and their content.

Once the genre is defined, I turn to look at Kat Blaque's video for the way it uses the genre specifically to tell the story of her transition, how she employs both visual and textual elements to tell this story and to create identification with both her trans viewers as well as others

who she hopes will come to better understand the experience of trans people, and to understand how it is not outside the norm of other stories in the genre. While Blaque herself is one particular person with one particular life narrative, her narrative reaches viewers who might identify with her and viewers wanting to know more.

My decision to closely analyze Blaque's DML video submission is manifold. Though Blaque's submission is reminiscent of other transition narratives, her notoriety, intersectional identity, and use of multiple modes to convey her narrative set her apart from other transition narrative vlogs. On May 1, 2017, The Advocate published an article on Blaque, calling her a "role model for trans youth" who is "regularly invited to speak at colleges, often in conservative areas, on social and political topics. Her YouTube videos are shown as educational tools in classrooms, which she finds very affirming" (Guerrero). Blaque is known to be a vocal and influential part of the LGBTQ community, and her multimodal vlog mimics her own intersectional identity.

Guided by multiple theories in genre and visual analysis, this thesis argues that Draw My Life videos are an emerging digital genre and a worthy focus of rhetorical scholars. Using Blaque's video as a case study compared to other submissions in the tag, this thesis also seeks to understand how Blaque's narrative challenges the power dynamics in contemporary visuals through her Draw My Life (DML) submission.

## CHAPTER 2

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following section overviews various theories on genre, comics, art, and visual design in order to understand the complexities and uses of the YouTube Draw My Life tag. Given that the videos examined here are dynamic—containing sound, moving visuals, narration, and textual elements—a “dynamic” and blended theoretical framework is required to understand the kind of narrative these videos enable, the audiences they are able to reach, and the way they can empower their creators and create a supportive and affirming space for those struggling to see how their own narratives fit into the larger social fabric. This section begins with a discussion of genre theory that emerges from rhetorical studies and then shifts to the visual with considerations of the role of comics, since the Draw My Life video is in the format of a comic in that it is drawn and then “animated” through the use of video.

## Genre Theory

Stine Lomborg’s “Social Media as Communicative Genres” considers digital media technology, specifically social media, to be communicative genres. Lomborg deems genre studies as “ever more relevant as a concept for grasping the myriad of online communication forms” (61). The author explains the shift in genre analysis to categorize based on content and form to that of “function and purpose” (62). Lomborg argues that the “constant flux” of social media genres requires us to consider “production and reception” of the genres (64). As new sites emerge, old generic forms destabilize or disintegrate. But the addition of new sites is not the only flux—how users urge sites to change *for* them is another flux. For example, the creators of

YouTube intended the video-sharing site to be a dating website where users could upload videos of themselves, but it quickly evolved into users uploading whatever they wanted (Cloud).

Therefore, according to Lomborg, it is the user of social media that determines how it evolves.

As the introduction shows, the Draw My Life tag brings together existing genres that emerge from narratives or life stories, along with comics' inventive visual resources to construct a rich and powerful genre that destabilizes the original blog form—users needed a different form of blogging, and so it came to existence. The first part of my theoretical framework examines the formation and evolution of genre theory, paying significant attention to Carolyn R. Miller's work on the subject. I supplement her original ideas of genre theory with her application of the theory to blogs and a recent expansion of genre theory's components.

### **Miller's genre theory**

Early in "Genre as Social Action," Miller notes the importance of genre study by stressing that "it emphasizes some social and historical aspects of rhetoric that other perspectives do not" (151). Miller's goal is to determine the process of categorization for scholars in genre work.

Defining a genre, according to Miller, stems not from "the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish" (151). Further analysis of genre allows Miller to break down genre into three parts: substance, form, and rhetorical action. Substance, or "the elements and aims," and form, or its "tense, proofs, and style," combine to result in an effect or action—turning genre "rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action" (153). She comes to the conclusion that five features allow use to conceptualize genres. The five features of a genre offered by Miller are as follows:

- (1) Genre refers to a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action; as action, it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose.
- (2) As meaningful action, genre is interpretable by means of rules...
- (3) Genre is distinct from form: form is the more general term used at all levels of the hierarchy. Genre is a form at one particular level that is a fusion of lower-level forms and characteristic substance.
- (4) Genre serves as the substance of forms at higher levels; as recurrent patterns of language use, genres help constitute the substance of our cultural life.
- (5) A genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence (“objectified social need” (157)); it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent. (163)

Genres, then, are not simply formal or substantial. Rather, Miller argues, they are determined by their context—the rhetorical action that stems from the melding of substance and form is what defines a genre.

### **Blogging as a genre**

Miller and Shepherd give an in-depth look at the evolution of the blog, which originated in the 1990s. They detail the tensions between public and private life stemming from media’s growth and intrusion into celebrity life, such as talk shows and reality television, with emphasis placed on the implications of what emerges from these evolving medias—a type of “voyeurism” in the form of the public gaze (5). Miller and Shepherd warn of this voyeurism and its complement, exhibitionism, but they add that both are likely to become accepted facets of these

public and private displays (6). Pointing out the agency in blogging, Miller and Shepherd make note of the willingness of bloggers to place their personal information out where the public has access to it, thereby becoming “willing objects” (5). It is important to understand this willingness as they continue to define the blog as a genre.

#### Semantic content or substance

According to Miller and Shepherd’s work, the content of the blog is one of the most important aspects (7). Blog content can vary, but the authors cite various sources who stress “‘personality,’ ... ‘personal thoughts,’ and self-expression” as key components of blog substance.

#### Formal features

Miller and Shepherd determine that most bloggers and researchers perceive blogs to share a similar format: many “contain dated entries, starting with the most recent, and a majority include external links,” most are frequently updated, and most are brief (8). However, Miller and Shepherd dispute these perceptions through other studies. What they demonstrate is that blogs are actually not as frequently updated as it seems and external linking happens a majority of the time but not always. Thus, they ponder the decision to define a genre “by an ideal or by the mean, by expectation or by experience” (9). They decide it is best to be open to the possibility that a blog’s success may not be easily measured.

#### Pragmatic action, exigence, and social action

Miller and Shepherd characterize the action of blogs in two ways: “self-expression and community development” (9). As the content of a blog is highly personal, the blogger’s content



is an expression of their thoughts, desires, and opinions; this self-validation allows for community building, as “blogs are also intended to be read” (10). Bloggers encourage feedback and audience response through comment spaces, and linking to other bloggers in the community inspires complex connections (10).

Miller and Shepherd emphasize that the exigence of a blog must be characterized “as some widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self” (14), which blends the public and the private. The situation of diary-like commentary on the public web “allow[s] bloggers to cultivate the self in a public way” (Miller and Shepherd 15). This blending suggests that blogs, primarily narratives, foster a connection between audiences seeking validation of themselves as well. As Miller and Shepherd put it, “bloggers [are interested] in locating, or constructing, for themselves and for others, an identity that they can understand as unitary, as ‘real’” (15).

### **Emerging genres**

In *Emerging Genres in New Media Environments*, Miller proposes a new way to group genres into manageable categories. These four domains that genres fit into are: (1) marketed or commercial genres, (2) administered genres, (3) institutional genres, and (4) vernacular genres (23-25). Vernacular is the genre domain most closely suited to the blog—and therefore the vlog—as Miller writes:

New technologies that have helped saturate our life-world with marketed media products have also enabled more people to become active producers. New technologies give consumers the tools of production and of dissemination, which enable them through collective practice to create new vernacular genres... People

have the means to do new kinds of things and to do them collectively, so that they can rapidly become joint modes of social action—holistically identifiable, socially meaningful, and reproducible. (25)

She admits these categories may not be limited to just these, and there is the potential for genre domains to slip into others by being “co-opted” (25). In the same way that “genres change, evolve, and decay” (*Genre as Social Action* 163), so do these proposed domains.

### **Genre as a Whole**

This thesis combines the various aspects of genre theory put forth by Miller. While her original work sets the foundation for understanding genres, Miller and Shepherd’s application of genre theory to that of the blog genre provides a useful framework to analyze the video counterpart of blogs—the vlog. Therefore, in the next two chapters of this thesis, my construction of the vlog genre and its sub-genres relies on Miller and Shepherd’s study. In addition, the vernacular domain recently introduced by Miller equips scholars with an updated understanding of genres in new media environments—this domain emphasizes my earlier claims that new media offers agency to creators.

### **Understanding the Visual Medium of Draw My Life**

This next section of my theoretical framework explains Scott McCloud’s theory on comics. Within *Understanding Comics*, McCloud not only defines comics, but he also illustrates (both textually and visually, as his book doubles as a graphic novel) the complexities of comics and what they mean for creators and readers of images.

McCloud's readers see framed and unframed drawings (panels) alongside text bubbles and captions as he writes his informational text as a graphic novel, or an extended comic book. Within these frames, he refines a broad definition for comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9).

In comics, what the writer or artist writes and says is not always what is drawn. In fact, sometimes comics do not contain words, but they do follow a sequence which is intended to be *read*, as McCloud demonstrates with Max Ernst's 1934 "collage novel," *Une Semaine de bonté*, or A Week of Kindness. McCloud argues that Ernst's artistic endeavor does not contain a conventional story, yet "there is no mistaking the central role which sequence plays in the work. Ernst doesn't want you to browse the thing, he wants you to read it!" (19). A particular complexity emerges from the combination of text and visuals in sequence. McCloud explores this complexity through the artistic choice inevitable in comics:

When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area. When a scene shows you all you 'need' to know...the latitude for scripting grows enormously. It could become internal monologue; perhaps something wildly incongruous; maybe it's all just a big advertisement; or a chance to ruminate on broader topics. (158)

The artistic choice to display any combination of text and visuals implies that whatever is shown, or is not shown, is significant and purposeful. Of course, determining an artist/writer's intent is not without pitfalls, but as Aristotle and numerous rhetoricians after him have argued, it is the audience's take-away which determines an artifact's purpose. McCloud furthers this idea by explaining that comic artists can become fragmentary, as the artist makes the choice to not

include every detail, to play with emotions, and to jump around in time, which will invoke a response in the audience—but this response cannot be absolutely predicted. For example, a comic artist may show one panel in the present, and the next panel might jump back in time to depict a former scene. Within these scenes, the comic artist may develop a new reaction from the audience based on stylistic changes. The comic artist could switch from color to black and white, or alter the drawing style, or use only text to “tell” the story rather than “showing” the story. Comic artists may use whatever combination of text and visuals to convey the story.

Much like what an artist places in the comics panel and what the artist does not place in the comics panel, when it comes to the definition of comics, “the secret is not in what the definition says but what it doesn’t say!” (McCloud 21). His broad definition of comics does not restrict a comics style, its genre, its form, its content, etc. When discussing choice of materials, McCloud maintains the beauty of his broad definition. He writes, “Nothing is said about paper and ink. No printing process is even mentioned. Printing itself is not even specified...No materials are ruled out by our definition. No tools are prohibited” (22). McCloud considers comics to be a medium, and a visual one at that. He explains that comics “is a sight-based medium. The whole world of visual iconography is at the disposal of comics creators!” (McCloud 202). Comics must be useful to a broad range of artists or creators, and so “For comics to mature as a medium, it must be capable of expressing each artist’s innermost needs and ideas. But each artist has different inner needs, different points of view, different passions, and so needs to find different forms of expression” (57).

As Lomborg discusses the constant flux of social media genres, McCloud’s theory acknowledges that even comics are susceptible to change by the user, ever-evolving. Rather than allowing this change to dissuade him as a creator, he emphasizes that comics are a changing but

important means of communication. McCloud writes, “Throughout its history, comics has harnessed the power of cartoons to command viewer involvement and identification and realism to capture the beauty and complexity of the visible world” (203-204). Comics artists maintain an agency that not only empowers them, but is a significant means of communication that creators willing to use the medium can employ. McCloud declares that “Today, comics is one of the very few forms of mass communication in which individual voices will still have a chance to be heard” (197), and this exemplifies what I will argue in my analysis about Blaque and the other DML video narratives.

Another way to understand the power and appeal of images is provided by John Berger’s classic work *Ways of Seeing* particularly in terms of the depiction of the female body and in defining the difference of the nude vs naked – the objectified body vs the unique person expressed through the body. While Berger’s work is not the major theory guiding my framework, his discussion of images, the body, and power is important when considering this case study, though it is also important to keep in mind that Berger did not anticipate his theory to apply to YouTube videos. He did, however, understand advertisement reproduction and circulation, which mimics the viral nature of memes and YouTube videos.

### **Gazing upon nudes**

According to Berger, “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (9), including the people with whom we interact. Thus, a form of communication takes place. Berger’s second textual essay examines the depiction of women and their bodies in art. He claims that “modern means of production have...destroy[ed] the authority of art” (32), and this notion is amplified later with his belief that the unequal

relationship of men portraying nude women in art “is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity” (63). This implies the notion that women are hyper-conscious of their bodies and actions, resulting in internalized sexism/internalized misogyny.

Addressing the difference between nakedness and nudity, Berger clarifies, “the nude also relates to lived sexuality” (53). Berger says, “To be naked is to be oneself,” while “To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude... Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display” (54). Nakedness is freeing; nudity is constricting. Nakedness follows agency; nudity follows objectification. Berger continues, “To be naked is to be without disguise” (54). Nakedness does not hide, nor is it forced into view the way nudity is.

Complicating the notion of nudity even further, Berger explains that nudity, because it is on display, “is a form of dress” (54). Except the “clothing” of the nude is not by choice, and in opposition the viewer (who owns the painting or has the privilege to observe it), is presumed to be clothed. Berger illustrates this removal of agency in his discussion of Venus and Cupid in “Allegory of Time and Love” by Bronzino. Venus, held and kissed by Cupid, has a torso and pubic area presented toward the audience. Of this, Berger says, “[Venus’s] body is arranged the way it is, to display it to the man looking at the picture. This picture is made to appeal to his sexuality” (55). One exception to the agency-lacking nude was the “exceptional nude”—Berger describes this as a nude who is “no longer nude...they break the norms of the art-form; they are paintings of loved women, more or less naked” (57). The exceptional nude is depicted as an agent: “The way the painter has painted her includes her will and her intentions in the very

structure of the image,” where it seems she revokes the viewer’s idea that she is naked for him. Her power stems from her decision to be naked for herself.

This empowerment extends beyond the subjects within frames, however. Berger outlines a complex belief that images today must function as a language that empowers and subverts the ideas that artists and the masses are not active agents in image-making (and image-owning, by extension):

If the new language of images were used differently, it would, through its use, confer a new kind of power. Within it we could begin to define our experiences more precisely in areas where words are inadequate.... Not only personal experience, but also the essential historical experience of our relation to the past: that is to say the experience of seeking to give meaning to our lives, or trying to understand the history of which we can become the active agents. (32-33)

Berger’s language of images—a necessary tool for when “words are inadequate”—overlaps with that of McCloud’s argument for the use of a textual/visual comics. According to Berger, “What matters now is who uses that language for what purpose” (33). Again, McCloud shares this hope for creators and the masses to use a language of images as well as text to tell their own stories. Now is the time for people to “situate [themselves] in history” (Berger 33).

### A Language for Visuals

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen provide scholars with a useful vocabulary to describe, analyze, and understand visuals. Among the topics discussed in *Reading Images* is “Narrative Representations” and “Representations and Interactions,” which inform my approach to the visual analysis of DML videos and Blaque’s narrative.

## **Act participants**

Kress and van Leeuwen define two “participants” in semiotic acts, which I condense and summarize here for the purpose of this case study: “the *interactive participants*—participants who make images or view them, and *represented participants*—the people, places, and things represented in and by the speech or writing or image, the participants about whom or which we are speaking or writing or producing images” (48). In this case, the YouTube creators and the audience members (the living beings) are *interactive participants*, whereas the DML subjects which are seen on-screen as drawn representations (the comic figures) are *represented participants*.

The concept of “participants” is necessary to understand when considering what Kress and van Leeuwen describe as the power of shapes. They claim that shapes have the ability to fascinate, awe, and even “directly affect our nervous systems” (53). Two shapes in particular aid my analysis of the videos in this case study. Kress and van Leeuwen state, “In contemporary Western society, squares and rectangles are the elements of the mechanical, technological order” (54). Squares and rectangles are human constructions, as they do not appear in nature (55). Circles, in contrast, “[denote] ‘endlessness, warmth, protection’” (54), and represent “organic and natural order” (55). The choice by the artist to use these shapes to depict participants in a drawing or a comic then brings with it particular associations and assumptions.

## **The image act and the gaze**

Combine these participants with Kress and van Leeuwen’s chapter on representation and interaction, which describes “the image act and the gaze” (116). Imagine a framed photo that



contains a represented participant inside the frame. This represented participant is a person, and the person's eyes are "looking" directly at the viewer of the photo. Considering that the viewer of this photo is the interactive participant, Kress and van Leeuwen determine that a connection occurs between these two participants. This connection is an imaginary line of sight, or what Kress and van Leeuwen term a "vector." The authors detail the functions of this connection: first, "it creates a visual form of direct address," and second, "it constitutes an 'image act'" (117). They continue, "the [represented] participant's gaze...demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with [the represented participant]" (118). Viewers are therefore invited to identify on some level with the represented participants, or figures.

### Fusing Theories and Methodology

We see power and agency, multimodality, and identity playing out within each of these theories. These theories also demonstrate calls to action. Miller and Shepherd emphasize that the blog-as-genre must have a rhetorical action in addition to its substance and form. McCloud believes comics are a useful tool for everyday people to share their stories, and so he calls us to understand what comics can do for us. Berger yearns for a people or class to take hold and agency of their histories and their representation, and to recognize the way women, in particular, have been taught to see themselves as objects—the viewed subject—through the means of art. Finally, Kress and van Leeuwen provide scholars with the vocabulary to communicate about images—thus advocating a new language for understanding. Together, these theories merge to broaden our perspective on new media genres and their implications for empowerment.

## Methodology

Chapter 3 of my thesis, *Constructing the Genre*, is broken into three main parts. First, I establish the vlog genre guided by Miller's 1984 genre theory and Miller and Shepherd's theory of blogging as a genre. Second, I define the DML genre by emphasizing the criteria a DML video must have in order to fulfill the expectations of that genre—these criteria are defined through an examination of the four DML videos. Within the third section, I apply McCloud's definition of comics to these multimedia artifacts, in order to deepen the understanding of a DML video.

Chapter 4 of my thesis, *The Case Study*, uses the genre criteria to situate Blaque's video within the genre—does her video follow the genre's criteria? Finally, I determine what Blaque's narrative means for rhetoric scholars through an examination of the power, gender, and identity dynamics in her vlog submission, guided by the visual theories of Berger and Kress and van Leeuwen. This section applies the visual theories of Berger and Kress and van Leeuwen to analyze how Blaque's video addresses identity, power, and the struggles faced in revising one's gender identity.

My goal, in looking closely at one particular video within the DML tag, is to understand more deeply the usefulness of multimedia narratives to tackle issues of identity, gender, and power. This understanding then presents more opportunities for instructors to use multimodal examples to explore these issues and to help students craft their own narratives, for communicators to utilize advancing technologies, and for narratives to have the space they need to exist, be heard, and be amplified.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONSTRUCTING THE GENRE

#### The Vlog Genre

Miller and Shepherd's categorization of the blog genre easily transposes with the video blog. Looking at YouTube specifically, vlogs appear as a broad genre, with sub-genres falling beneath its umbrella (e.g. Mommy vlogs, travel vlogs, cooking vlogs). Vlogs may be confessional, mundane, spectacular—essentially, they can be anything, and anyone can create them. The following criteria for a vlog is broad and basic, so as to set a foundation for the Draw My Life video.

The semantic content or substance of the vlog mimics that of the blog, as the content is one of the most important aspects. Where the blog shows “personality...personal thoughts...and self-expression” (Miller and Shepherd 8) through written entries, the vlog does the same through video entries. The blog can use images to supplement the content, but the vlog is, by default, primarily visual. In the same way that the blog may supplement additional features, the vlog creator may include digital text, such as a title sequence or pop-ups within the video.

The vlog's formal features differ slightly from that of the blog. The majority of vlogs and blogs contain dated entries, starting with the most recent. The update frequency of the vlog, however, is hard to determine without quantitative data, but in general they follow the same pattern of being updated on a regular basis. Vlogs tend to be brief, but due to the recorded format, vloggers may easily ramble, thus lengthening the content of the vlog.

If vloggers use YouTube as their host site, then creators have individual channels, rather than vlogging websites. When visiting a vlogger's YouTube channel, viewers are presented with

a reverse-chronological ordering of the uploaded vlogs, with timestamps and view count.

YouTube is not the only platform where vlogs are hosted. Social media in general is receptive to video format, and vloggers can use blog software and content management systems (e.g. Wordpress) to host their vlogs. Thus, the vlog and the blog are interchangeable—content creators who primarily blog may occasionally vlog, and vice versa.

Much like the blog, the pragmatic action, exigence, and social action of the vlog centers around the self in the community. Cooking vloggers may share their experiences with recipe creation, they may ask their viewers to “subscribe” and leave feedback in the comments below the video—all aspects shared by the cooking blogger’s actions. YouTube creators can link to other content within the description box of their videos, or place clickable link areas over the video itself. Ultimately, the vlogger shares with viewers the topic interest (though people uninterested will inevitably stumble upon the vlogs as well).

Again, the vlog and the blog have much in common. Small differences set them apart, but they primarily achieve the same rhetorical action with similar elements of substance and form. Now that a genre foundation is set for the vlog, let us consider a sub-genre of the vlog: the Draw My Life video. To reduce confusion, I refer to DML videos as their own genre within this case study, though it would likely be more apt to call them a sub-genre of vlogs, much like a cooking vlog is a sub-genre of the blog. Additionally, Miller’s proposal for genre domains means vlogs fall into the vernacular genre category because people (the creators), rather than a corporation or a higher authority, use new medias to construct the genre—thus, people hold the power.

### The Draw My Life Genre

Draw My Life is inherently autobiographical. The nature of this particular genre is to show and tell the story of the creator's life, rather than someone else's. This is why the YouTube channel, Draw My Life, does not fit within the genre, as it draws the lives of others rather than the channel creators. Because Draw My Life videos are diary-like video blogs, they may be considered to fit within the vlog genre. However, their content takes on additional characteristics that the general vlog does not. Therefore, it is assumed that the Draw My Life video has all of the aspects of the vlog, with additional aspects outlined below.

#### **Why these Draw My Life videos**

This case study examines five DML video submissions in order to establish some key components of the genre. While it may be true that Brian O'Reilly created the first video in the Draw My Life tag, the only submission that links him to the tag was uploaded in May of 2013. Sam Pepper had already uploaded his own submission in January. This thesis will consider Pepper's video the first official submission in the Draw My Life tag, as it has a timestamp that puts it ahead of any other DML submission. Another reason this thesis will not examine O'Reilly's submission for the DML genre criteria is because the format of his submission functions as a combination of a DML about himself as well as an inspirational video for people struggling with the stresses of life, such as depression. While he narrates and draws for most of the video, the majority of the video is him addressing the audience, and only briefly narrating his own life and struggles. Therefore, O'Reilly's submission looks much different from the other DML videos.

The first creator I examine is Sam Pepper, who is often (somewhat controversially) credited as being the first person to publish a Draw My Life video to YouTube. Pepper “tagged” or addressed other friends/channels, who he challenged to create additional DML videos. Because Pepper’s video is the original DML video, others likely followed his lead in terms of formatting, substance, and action. The second video I examine is by Zoe Sugg, or Zoella as her YouTube channel is named. Sugg runs a fashion and beauty YouTube channel, and boasts the highest amount of channel subscribers out of these five videos. Third, I examine Tiffany Garcia, or iHasCupquake, who trails slightly behind Sugg in subscriber and video view count. The fourth video I examine is Anthony Padilla’s submission. Padilla is a co-creator of a wildly popular YouTube channel, Smosh. Originally, Padilla had uploaded an original DML video, but has since deleted it and uploaded a recent and more up-to-date version. Finally, Kat Blaque has the fewest number of subscribers and the smallest view count on her DML submission (see Table 1). Her video, though, does not conform completely to the “traditional” DML video, and therefore she presents an interesting narrative to examine because, as I will demonstrate, she both engages and extends the parameters of the genre.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An important disclaimer about Sam Pepper: Recently, tabloid and gossip websites have reported that Pepper has been accused of rape and sexual assault by multiple women (Broderick and Hall). Whether or not these allegations are true, he has broadcast on his YouTube channel his infamous “Fake Hand Ass Pinch Prank,” which shows him pinching the buttocks of women in public. BuzzFeed reports that he claims the prank video was in a series of videos meant to shed light on sexual harassment of men. Regardless, I do not condone his actions, and I would not have included him in this thesis, were it not for him being one of the original creators in the Draw My Life tag.

## Draw My Life criteria

The following criteria relies on four example DML videos, which will demonstrate the necessary criteria in order to conform to the vlog genre, as well as define a sub-genre within—the Draw My Life genre.

**Table 1.** *Draw My Life creators at a glance — all data as of April 27, 2017.*

Creator Name	YouTube User Name	Approx. Subscriber Count	DML Submission Date	DML Submission Approx. View Count
Sam Pepper	OFFICIALsampepper	2,397,700	1/8/13	2,307,000
Zoe Sugg	zoella280390	11,759,600	4/14/13	15,162,300
Tiffany Garcia	iHasCupquake	5,519,800	4/17/13	12,961,600
Anthony Padilla	AnthonyPadilla	1,320,100	10/7/16	2,224,400
Kat Blaque	TransDIYer	120,700	7/13/13	81,300

### Semantic content or substance

This section examines the story within the narrative, or what occurs and is discussed. While these narratives are distinct, they share similar structures. They follow a typical narrative arc, or a pyramid structure, where the peak of the pyramid is the climax.

The first criterion is *rising action*. In narrative structure, this would be considered the rising action. This criterion explores the events that occur before the narrator faces the *crisis points*. For example, Pepper grows up fighting bullies and finding a mentor in his art teacher. Sugg uses self-deprecating humor as she traverses her childhood, where friends and family play

an important role. Garcia is picked on, ventures into the world of gaming with her brother, and meets her future husband during high school. Padilla depicts a tumultuous childhood and his turn to YouTube and coding.

The next criterion is *the crisis points*, where the narrator is at their lowest—they find themselves either failing, dropping out, separating from friends and family. This plays out in a number of ways, and the crisis can sometimes emerge from psychological struggles or exterior struggles and defeats. Additionally, crisis points can occur at multiple times in someone's life. For example, Pepper's teacher inspires him to attend college, but he drops out, leading to a string of odd jobs. Sugg details her relentless anxiety and how it encroaches upon every aspect of her life, as she loses self-confidence and finds herself unsure of her future. Even once Sugg figures out how to cope with her anxiety, it is never completely cured. Like Sugg, Garcia also faces the daunting prospect of not knowing what she wants to do with her life. Padilla suffers unbearable panic attacks for five years.

The next criterion, *triumphs*, demonstrates the narrator triumphing over their struggles. This develops in a number of ways, including finding YouTube as a source of reprieve from their struggles. Pepper goes on a reality TV show and starts a YouTube channel where he connects with like-minded people. Sugg also starts a YouTube channel and a blog—the more she interacts with the YouTube community, the less her anxiety affects her. Garcia graduates, takes on YouTube full-time, and gets married. Padilla chooses to not let the panic attacks control him. He moves to Los Angeles to get out of a manipulative relationship, and finally starts to feel like his old self again.

The final semantic criterion, *falling action*, shows the actions that follow the triumphant moment(s), which are generally less exciting and lead to a conclusion. Though the action is



relatively anti-climactic, these depict an upward slope for the narrator, as they generally find themselves optimistic about the future and heading down the “right path.” Most narrators reference the support of their subscribers during this part. Pepper concludes by saying he “know[s] this isn’t the end of it,” and draws himself with a smile on his face, surrounded by several friends. Sugg learns to cope with anxiety and tries to persevere through the uncomfortable moments. Garcia emphasizes her subscribers’ support. She looks forward to the growth of herself along with her subscribers. Padilla accepts the fact that he is an anxious introvert.

### Formal features

There are various ways that the DML video deals with formal features (see Figure 1). First, all use a dry-erase marker on a whiteboard showing the artists’ hands drawing. In terms of detail in the figures drawn, as McCloud indicates, comic forms can be as simple as stick figures or as complex as fully fleshed-out, detailed drawings. This range is represented from Pepper’s and Padilla’s stick-figures to Garcia’s detailed figures. In terms of color, three use simple black and white and one narrator uses color to depict certain elements of her story, such as her eyes.

Compared to the form above, Blaque uses a more complex drawing style. The bodies she draws are literally fleshed out, as she shades her virtual self with a skin tone representative of her own, and the bodies are not simple stick figures. Still, it would be incorrect to say she draws the elements three dimensionally, because even though she uses shade and light to give an illusion of depth, it is just that—an illusion. Her colors contrast with the other example videos as well. The settings, objects, and people of her narrative are drawn in varying colors on an “inverse” whiteboard, or a background that shifts from black to brown to emerald throughout her video.

She draws bright red hearts, and a bright red bag when she talks about how it defined part of her personal style in college, for example.



Figure 1. Draw My Life form examples — shown left to right, top to bottom: Pepper, Sugg, Garcia, Padilla, Blaque.

### Pragmatic action

Unless a creator disables comments on a video (and none of the four here have done so), then it can be assumed the creators encourage audience members to respond to the video in the comment spaces provided. Given that these videos are shared on YouTube, which is itself a popular broadcast mechanism and features the ability to easily link to other social media outlets, this suggests the creators want people to encounter their stories. The self-cultivation aspect, put forth by Miller and Shepherd, is clear given that the narrator shares their life-story with the public. In this case, DML videos are not a particular genre because of their form, or their content, but because they attempt to persuade others to identify with their stories and experiences.

### The Comic Nature of the Draw My Life video

McCloud presents a broad definition of comics to encompass a variety of content, formats, and styles. After examining the four previous DML videos, it is clear that they are all comics, regardless of their vlog form. In terms of content, the fragmentary style of comics closely resembles another style of writing—the narrative, which is personal and modeled after the creator’s needs, and the vlog, which can ramble and jump around in time. As for the format of the DML video, McCloud’s theory has already considered the potential problems with the format of the medium. Considering vlogs are not printed mediums, it is understandable to worry that a digital format of comics could constrain McCloud’s definition of a comic. However, it does not matter the fact that some of these videos are hand-drawn and later broadcast digitally while others are original digital creations, as McCloud states, “No materials are ruled out... No tools are prohibited” (McCloud 22).

This means that YouTube is not the medium—comics is. More specifically, the medium is the comic vlog. YouTube is simply a platform to distribute the medium. Videos within the Draw My Life tag certainly follow this format of “juxtaposed pictorial or other images in deliberate sequence,” and all five videos explored within this text utilize not only those pictorials but text or captions as well. One key difference between the traditional printed and digital comic is that printed comics show a sequence of frames with different scenes inside, whereas a digital comic shows one frame that constantly fills with new scenes. This digital frame is literally the physical digital constraints of the video, just as a printed comic’s frames are only so large. Further, if YouTube is not the medium, then YouTube is actually just what it started as: a video-sharing website, or a “repository” as Soukup pointed out earlier. YouTube is simply a container for the digital comics medium. Taking this further, if the DML tag is suitably considered a comic vlog, then I posit that there are two types of comic vlogs within the DML tag: digitized and digital.

### **Digitized versus Digital Comics**

What follows is applicable solely to videos within the Draw My Life tag. Digitized comics are comics that have been created by hand, then filmed and turned digital due to the necessity of broadcasting or uploading them to YouTube. Examples of digitized comics are the DML videos of Pepper, Zoella, Garcia, and Padilla. Digital comics, on the other hand, are never physically material. Instead, digital comics are created through computers, such as with a graphics tablet and digital art software or a drawing application. Then, these digital creations are filmed via a screencast. Screencasting occurs when someone uses a screen-recording software on their electronic device to show all that occurs on that screen for a set amount of time.

Screencasting is frequently used in YouTube videos that demonstrate video game players going through a video game (another YouTube tag/genre entitled a “Let’s Play” or a “walkthrough”). Blaque’s DML is therefore a digital comic, as she uses digital creation from the very beginning of her final product.

It is important not to forget that digitized and digital comics share the same creation process. After all, creators of both types manually create these comics—the only distinction is the point of origin. If the DML video begins as a dry-erase board and marker, it will then be digitized as it is filmed and uploaded online. If the DML video begins as a digital comic, it still needs to be filmed, in this case as a screencast, and uploaded, but it was never *not* digital to begin with. Once the digitized or digital comic has been recorded, whether by camera or by screencast, it becomes a comic vlog. In summation: dry-erase and whiteboard comics become digitized comic vlogs, whereas digital comics are screencast and become digital comic vlogs.

Now we have established that Draw My Life videos fall under the vlog genre umbrella. The DML genre can also be considered comics, as the content fits McCloud’s definition of comics as “juxtaposed pictorial or other images in deliberate sequence.” Two kinds of Draw My Life videos exist—the digitized comic vlog and the digital comic vlog. The following chapter examines in-depth Kat Blaque’s DML submission with the established criteria. The next chapter will show that Blaque’s use of the criteria is unconventional—the guidelines put forth in this chapter are, as Miller and Shepherd, Lomborg, and McCloud have all indicated, able to be extended and modified. Due to Blaque’s narrative of the uncertainty of her gender and her gender transition, she adapts and expands the criteria to her needs.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE CASE STUDY

#### Genre Applied

Kat Blaque self-describes as a “feminist YouTuber, illustrator, animator, and writer” who began a career by combining her interests in animation, social media, and writing (About Me). As a prolific social media maven, she was nominated for a Short Award in 2017, which honors creators on social media. Her Facebook account has the most followers, with just under 200,000 page likes. Her YouTube subscriber count rests just under 120,700, and she has a Twitter following of almost 26,000. In addition to her social media accounts, she runs her website as a blog, which links to much of the content found on her social media accounts. She may have the smallest of the YouTube channels described here, but she has made a name for herself online. Her YouTube channel focuses on social justice and her personal opinions on social issues. One particular series she posts is “True Tea,” where viewers submit questions that she responds to, such as “Has political correctness gone too far?”

#### **A brief description of Blaque’s Draw My Life video**

In 2015, three years after she produced her Draw My Life video, Blaque said, “While yes, I am a feminist, I am a woman, and I am transgender, before I am anything I am black” (Why I’m Done). However, her 2013 narrative focuses mostly on her experience growing up trans. Blaque narrates her fourteen-minute video accompanied by six different instrumental songs that divide her life-story into sections. Her narrative mimics the same transformative drawing style that the other Draw My Life videos utilize, meaning she walks us through her

childhood and young adult life and concludes with a relatively positive tone. Her drawings set her apart from the other four videos explored earlier, though. Instead of a whiteboard, the background is dark (shifting from brown, to black, to emerald repeatedly). We never see her hands as she draws—instead, we experience an invisible hand that virtually draws the filled-out and colorful bodies and shapes of her story. Blaque’s drawings would not be considered three-dimensional, they are drawn with various shade and light, which allows them to appear as having more depth than the drawings by the other channels. She details her adoption at a very young age, including the fact she was given the name “Matthew” by her adoptive parents, and stops at her then-current state in 2013. She happily works as an animator, writer, and blogger while living with her current boyfriend.

### **Applying the genre criteria**

Because Blaque’s narrative attempts to cover her entire life, it is reasonably complex. Her DML video is also the longest of the five I examine within this thesis. She covers several main issues, some of which will be explored in-depth here:

- 1) She is uncertain at a young age regarding her gender, including performing traditionally “feminine” activities,
- 2) Puberty brings breast development and new confusions about whether she is “queer, gay, or trans,”
- 3) She considers herself, at the time, gender queer and living a “double life” as Matthew/Kitty at the beginning of college,



- 4) Her first-year boyfriend, Rob, wants a man and she cannot “necessarily be that for him,” which leads to the realization that she is not a boy and not queer, but rather a girl,
- 5) She decides to go “full time” for a year before starting to self-medicate with hormones, which helps her confidence about her appearance,
- 6) During “the best year,” senior year, she legally changes her name to Kathryn, and attempts to be “stealth” because nobody will know of her past,
- 7) Her friend exposes her secret that she is transgender,
- 8) She ends an abusive relationship which spurs her to wear her natural short hair, as a way to “repel the male gaze,” but also finds a new confidence in this appearance,
- 9) Her graduation results in depression as she feels like a failure, but she meets her current boyfriend, Nicholas, and begins a new journey as he is supportive of her career and her identity,
- 10) She gets her gender marker legally changed, begins to throw herself back into her work, and together she and her boyfriend start to follow their dreams.

### **Does Blaque’s video fit the criteria**

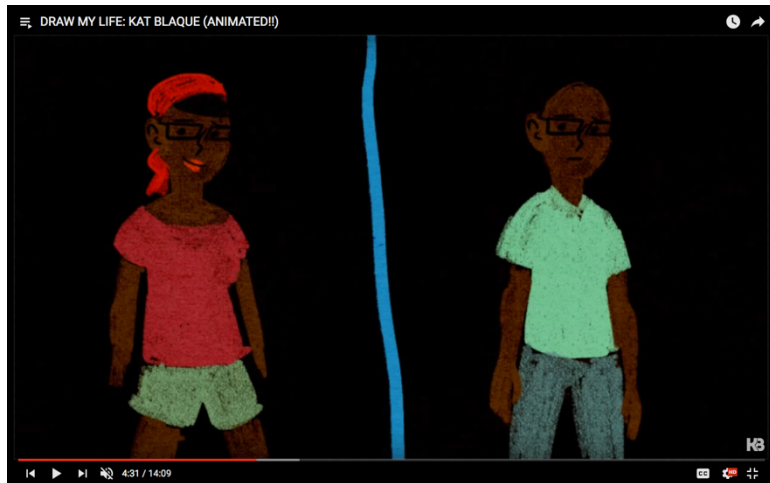
Blaque’s narrative video, given its length, covers a lot of territory. Her narrative is a roller-coaster of emotions and experiences. The fragmentary style proposed by McCloud is evident in her narrative, as she jumps back-and-forth occasionally as she narrates and draws. Because it is so long, she illustrates and narrates several instances in each of the “semantic

content or substance” categories, leading to a thorough and explicit narrative. Her narrative thus demonstrates overlap, where areas that seem like the pinnacle crisis points or triumphs are actually just one in a series of crises and triumphs.

### Semantic content or substance

Again, the *rising action* details the events that occur before the narrator faces the crisis point. Shown holding a bible, Blaque begins her narrative describing her very Christian adoptive parents, who gave her “the biblical name, Matthew.” She feels “different” from the other kids growing up and spends her childhood at the park pretending to be “a warrior princess” or doing art in preschool (she describes this as “more of a girl thing”). In fifth grade, she becomes aware of California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) and dreams of attending to practice her art.

In coming to terms with her identity, she develops a new feminine style for herself, which she depicts with headscarves (perhaps as a way to appear to have longer hair), shorter bottoms, and plaid shirts. She goes by the name, “Kitty,” at least some of the time. She reveals she is actually leading a “double-life” by living partially as “Matt,” shown through a split-screen with one side as Kitty and one side as Matt (see Figure 2). As she lives her double-life, she begins to date Rob.

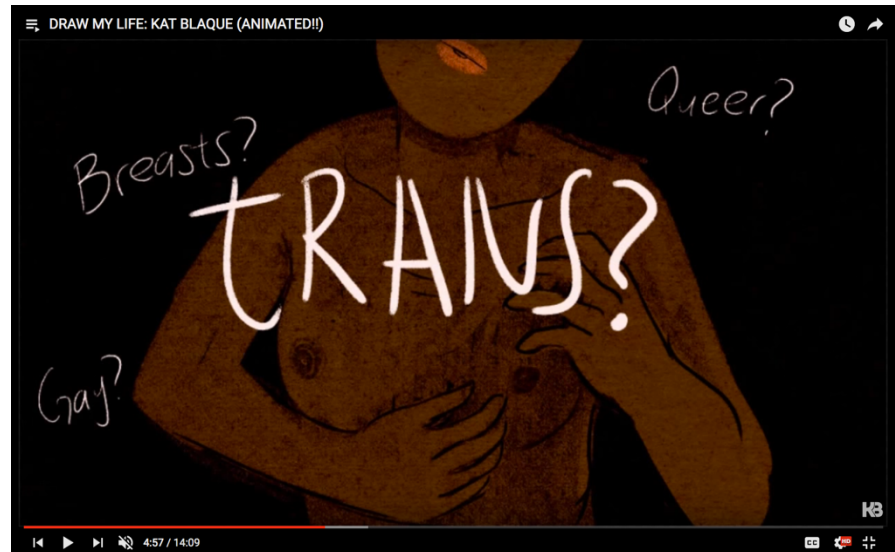


**Figure 2.** Blaque representing her "double-life."

Later in college, she animates films for her studies and as a junior she decides she needs to start taking hormones in order to get her body to look the way she wants it. During senior year, she gets to live in the MFA dorms, which excites her because she can live “stealth” because nobody will know her and therefore her past. However, she is not used to the sudden male attention and turns to YouTube to vent her frustrations at not being able to talk to anybody about her feelings. She meets Arturo, a gay man who becomes one of her best friends. She confesses to Arturo, who seems to support that she is trans, and he promises to keep her secret. Eventually she starts to grow her real hair out after wearing wigs for so long. One of her senior videos makes it into a college show, and she graduates with her BFA. She tries to get herself out of her slump by blogging and getting some illustration jobs [both a *triumph* and *rising action*]. She pours herself into her work and even gets an internship with an animation studio.

As indicated earlier in the discussion of genre, the *crisis points* depict the narrator at their lowest points, where they find themselves unable to function as they normally would. At these points, they encounter difficulty coping with the stress of their lives, or they experience something that disrupts them. Blaque experiences a number of crisis points in her narrative, and while some of them are smaller, they are all very serious because of the risk attached to her identity. When Blaque hits middle school, she becomes “a very dark kid” who wears hoodies to cover her body, which she is not happy with, and becomes depressed because she does not have any friends. She depicts this darkness with a dark background and a version of herself in shadow. Then she joins Drama and suddenly feels more confident in herself. She depicts herself in a bright pink shirt and the music shifts to a happier tune. The screen brightens even more by her inclusion of white masks of the Greek muses, Thalia and Melpomene to represent Drama. At this point, however, she begins to question herself. She wonders if she is a boy or a girl, and finds

comfort in the idea of being both, so she places herself somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. In middle school she also hits puberty, and begins to develop breasts. She's no longer sure what she is—gay? Queer? Trans (see Figure 3). She knows her body is telling her something, and living as both Matt and Kitty confuses her even more. She recognizes that “[Rob] wanted a man” in their relationship, and she “couldn’t necessarily be that for him,” as she is not comfortable “being seen as a guy in the relationship.” She visually erases her masculine clothing and draws herself next to Rob in her feminine style.



*Figure 3. Blaque's uncertainty about her identity.*

Self-medicating with hormones becomes nerve-racking. With Rob no longer part of the picture, she flirts with Arturo's roommate, and because Arturo does not like this, he reveals her trans identity to her crush. This spirals into one person telling another, which devastates her. She and Arturo do not speak for a month.

Later, she gets out of an abusive relationship and cuts off everything but her bangs to “repel the male gaze.” We see the drawing of the abusive ex next to her with shorter hair, and she draws a smile on her face as the ex gets literally crossed-out in red. After graduation, she moves back in with her parents and becomes severely depressed because she “had no job, no money, and no friends.” She feels like a failure. She still feels depressed because she does not find

herself to be as successful as she'd hoped. The commute to her internship is a 6-hour long bus ride, which she depicts with a bus across the screen, and the internship is stressful and consumes her life. The internship does not last long, however.

The events following the *crisis points* depict the narrator *triumphing* over the *crisis points*. Blaque triumphs in several ways. She gets into CalArts at 17, and comes out to her parents as gay, even though she knows that is not quite what she is, and we never actually learn how her parents respond. She comes to the realization that she is not a boy. She is a girl, and has been living with the wrong identity just to make others happy. She decides to “go full time” and really begins to love herself. Once she takes hormones, her body begins to transform and become what she desires. She is happy with how her body looks. Senior year she also gets her name legally changed to Kathryn.

Arturo apologizes, and she realizes she is somewhat relieved that she no longer has to act stealth. Her new hairstyle not only repels the male gaze but she finds more confidence in herself as well. She tries to get herself out of her slump by blogging and getting some illustration jobs. Despite her lack of success, she meets Nicholas, her current boyfriend, who is loving and accepting of who she is. He encourages her to work hard and keep pursuing her art. And eventually, an English professor approaches her to work on a children's book, which is where she is at the conclusion of the video. She and Nicholas are working toward their dreams—he wants to be a chef (depicted with a chef's hat and apron), and she wants to continue animation, fashion, and children's illustration (depicted with a children's book).

The *falling action* follows the triumphant moments—this action is generally less exciting and leads to a conclusion. In Blaque's case, she feels for the first time in her life that she “can say with a hundred percent certainty that I know who I am. And I'm really happy with who I've

become. I have a clear dream for the future and I know that I'm going to reach my goals." She concludes by saying thank you to her fans and asking them to subscribe. But she also stresses that her "story is not yet over."

### Formal features

Blaque's drawn narrative fits the "digital comic" style—she uses a digital drawing program to animate her drawings. This program allows her to use either a mouse or a graphics tablet (the latter of which is more likely) to draw her narrative. Because of the digital comic style, we never see her hands. However, because she is still using a pen or mouse to draw the content, her narrative is still considered a drawing. Situated within the genre, Blaque's forms are more complex and colorful than the other examples discussed within this thesis, but they maintain simplistic cartoon forms.

### Pragmatic action, exigence, and social action

Blaque shares intensely private and personal experiences with a very public audience. She exposes herself through her narrative and the way she draws her representational form. Due to her identity as a trans woman, she is even more at risk of an audience that will respond aggressively, and therefore actively try to disidentify with her and her experiences. But her audience is also composed of people going through similar experiences, as well as audience members who are supportive and/or curious. She depicts how an abusive relationship affects her, an experience shared by viewers and even others within the DML genre. One commenter on her DML video said,

... I think a lot of people who don't really know anyone who is trans have trouble seeing the personal side of trans issues, and this video is perfect for that kind of education. It was also exactly what I needed to hear right now. I can relate to many aspects of this video (I'm trans also), and it gave me some reassurance about not passing, as well as inspiration for my personal goals. :) (Taylor Grey)

Blaque's DML video proves to be educational and relatable.

#### Further Analysis of Blaque's video

Due to her unique drawing style and extensive content, her video is much more complex than the traditional Draw My Life submission. One could argue this is because she writes about very serious and complicated issues that come up throughout her life. There is not just one turning point for Blaque—she works through a number of situations that test her and affect her identity. She deals with the confusion of not knowing what identifiers really define her. Blaque faces depression from body dysmorphia and lack of a circle of friends to understand what she is going through. She goes through an abusive relationship, and struggles to find someone with whom she can match. Her art does not take off after graduation, causing deep turmoil in her conception of her ability and talent.

Yet in the end, it is easy to see that during each of these narrative segments, Blaque either finds confidence in herself, finds success, or finds love—whether through the love of another or through self-love. Her narrative does not hold back from the issues of identity, gender, and conformity that enter her life. Her story, while fraught with its ups and downs, is ultimately triumphant. And as she herself says, it is not over yet.

### **The power of shape in Draw My Life**

Kress and van Leeuwen's discussion of shapes is particularly important to the format of the YouTube vlog. They claim that squares "can connote the 'technological' positively, as a source of power and progress, or negatively, as a source of oppression which, literally and figuratively, 'boxes us in'" (55), which, when applied to a YouTube video, adheres to their logic. Because a YouTube video is primarily meant to be viewed, its digital dimensions maintain an aspect ratio like that of any screen. This digital boundary "boxes in" the creator's story, constraining their narrative. The audience watching or listening to the DML video is always limited, because the audience sees what is in the frame and nothing else. The creator, on the other hand, is only sometimes limited. When examining photographs, "we are aware...of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights" (Berger 10). The same can be said of the DML creator selecting the parts of their narrative to display. Because it is almost impossible that the creator was followed by a camera their whole life, the creator must choose to depict aspects of their narratives to share with the audience, and thus eliminate and neglect to include other aspects. This choice simultaneously gives the creator power while also limiting them.

Creators are limited by time/space and ability to draw. The limit of time/space happens because YouTube, the platform on which DML videos are shared, currently allows file sizes up to 128 gigabytes to be uploaded. This file size, while seemingly grand, has a quantifiable limitation. They are also limited physically in the size of the whiteboard. In addition, the creator's ability limits them, in most cases, as many of these YouTube creators are not artists or relatively skilled in drawing. Blaque maintains some authority in this respect, even surpasses the



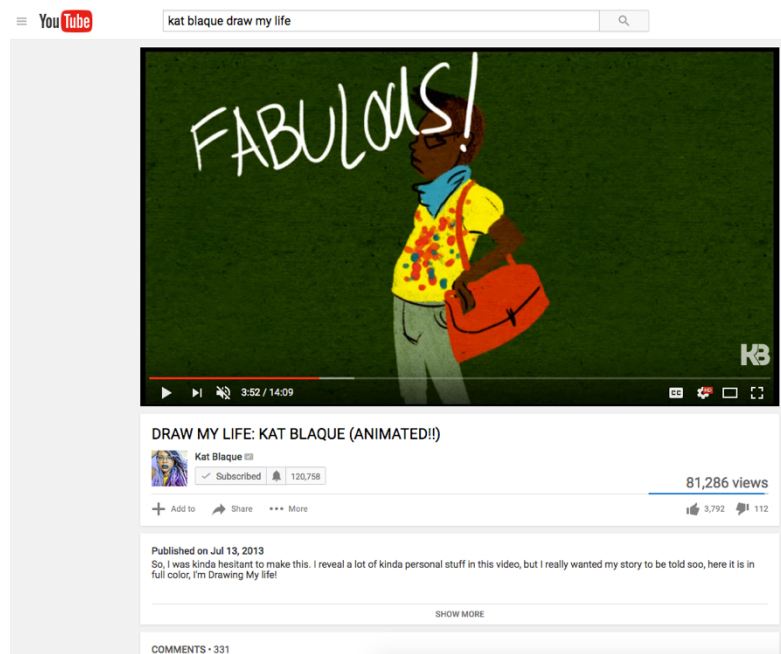
other creators here, because her skillset as an animator gives her an added boost to drawing ability.

The video box constrains, yet the square boundary also tells viewers that whatever falls within its parameters deserves to be watched. The square video on the YouTube page is the primary attention of the viewer, and with that comes a certain power. The fact that it exists is a powerful sign in itself—that viewers would be willing to spend their time in front of another square. Creators produce their story, distribute it via the platform, and share their messages with the world. However, creators maintain power because they are ultimately the dictators of what the audience sees. The audience can do nothing to change the narrative on screen, but the creator has that initial power. The creator, theoretically, maintains that power even after the video is uploaded, as YouTube allows creators to edit videos, either by splicing in content or trimming the existing content. Although audiences are always limited due to the digital frame of the media player, creators are only sometimes limited.

The digital boundary of the Draw My Life video contains the narrative, which is composed of organic shapes—the circles that Kress and van Leeuwen suggest connote endlessness and warmth. Within a scene in a DML video, creators usually draw the head of someone first, indicating the importance of the people within narratives. Of the five videos explored here, all but one draws a human head before any other object (as the first scene after the title scene). Organically-drawn people remain the primary focus of these narratives.

The video creator sketches within the frame of the whiteboard or digital canvas, which is then also framed by a recording or screencast, which is then uploaded to YouTube, where it fits into a video container with unyielding edges (see Figure 4). But the characters, settings, and objects inside the frame do not follow such stiffness. Bodies are not constructed with concrete

and straight-edges. Instead, circular heads and imprecise figures evoke a human imperfection. Viewers come to expect that content will appear within the frame of the YouTube video, but this architected rigidity is not what keeps them watching. Rather, they connect with the human element, the circular heads and the imprecise figures, which is bound inside the frame. Viewers witness the lived experiences of the narrator, and as the viewer's eyes connect with the narrator's drawn representation, Kress and van Leeuwen's concept of the "image act" occurs. Viewers are compelled to identify with the narrator or understand differences between the narrator and themselves. The represented narrator peers into the viewer, and beckons a response.



*Figure 4. The digital boundary of YouTube videos.*

### **Berger and Blaque—gender, power, and agency**

Berger's fear that a people or a class will not control their history is temporarily, if not perpetually, stymied by Blaque and the other DML creators. They are makers of history, in many ways. These self-portraits, given that they trace more than one point in time of the creator's life, can also be considered historical. Recall Berger's account that painters were commissioned to paint portraits for people. Now, the people who would not necessarily be artists can paint

themselves, illustrating a significant empowerment in their narrative communication. The narrators no longer have to be depicted as someone else saw them. They can depict themselves however they choose.

Creators not only use the tools of modern communication, but they publicize and distribute their own personal histories. Audiences who receive these personal histories redistribute them across social medias, and they discuss those personal histories in the comment sections of YouTube. The DML narratives transcend their home communities through the web of the internet. Topics like anxiety, divorce, and gender identity become relatable issues to the watchers of the world. Because Blaque's narrative focuses so heavily on her gender, Berger's critique of the (predominantly male) gaze applies to her drawn representation of herself.

The male gaze latches onto feminine bodies, so much so that women themselves are not even immune to the male gaze's encroachment on their own consciousness, argues Berger. Yet I counter that Blaque, because of her skill as an animator and storyteller, does not conform to this self-consciousness, at least not entirely. Blaque's complicated identity, as detailed above, is rooted in confusion and denial—confusion due to feeling “different” from the children around her, and denial in the sense that she eventually refuses the identity forced upon her and takes control of her actual identity. So, rather than Blaque being so self-conscious that she is consumed by representing herself femininely and as an object, she depicts herself strategically. This plays out in a number of ways.

Berger's discussion of nakedness and nudity is invoked by Blaque's video, since she depicts herself unclothed at multiple points. To Berger, nakedness is a choice, and Blaque, the creator of her own narrative and drawn representation, chooses to unclothe her animated self. This is complicated, however. Since Blaque is the one in control of showing her nakedness, it is

still an autonomous decision. Yet because there are spectators with the power to pause her video and redistribute it, her nakedness also has the potential to transform into nudity.

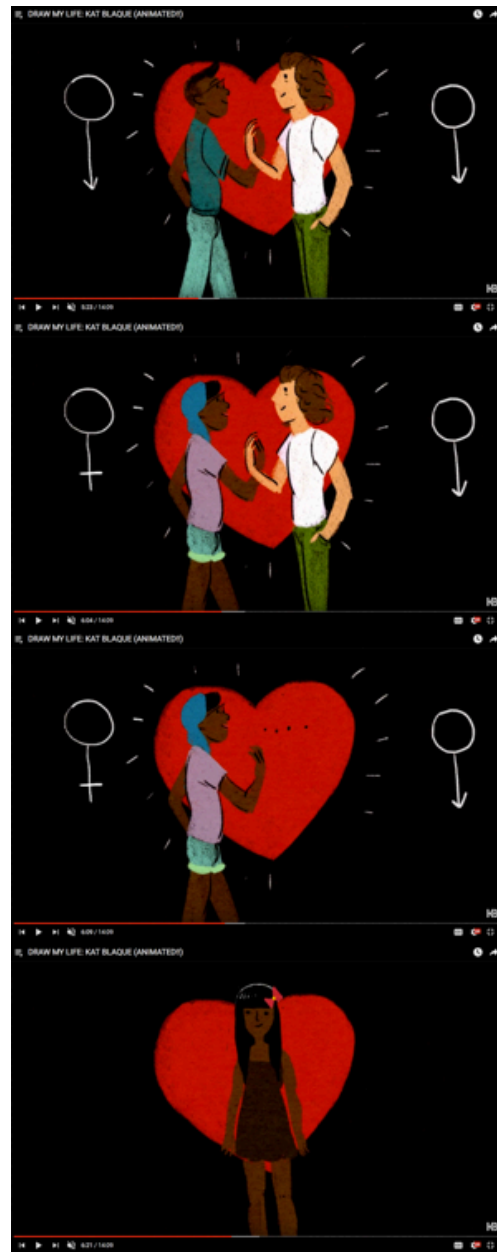
Blaque details that when she hit puberty she started developing breasts. The visual depiction of this moment is a topless Blaque from the lips down to mid-torso, hands reaching to touch the skin of and around her newly developing breasts. While in this scene Blaque may be unsure of what is happening to her body, she does not cover her breasts. She is not ashamed of her breast development. Instead, as Berger points out regarding nakedness, her unclothed body is presented, rather than put on display by the viewer.

From this middle school visual, we jump in time and see her experience dating as a freshman in college. This first relationship shows Matthew with Rob, and her jump from breast development to sexuality is significant. Blaque first depicts Matthew and Rob in front of a heart, and the astrological symbol for Mars (biological male) rests beside them both. The symbol beside Matthew turns into Venus (biological female), as Matthew assumes the gender of a woman, showing her realization that she can't be a "man." Blaque's representation of gender during this complex and confusing experience of sexuality complicates itself even further. As Matthew slowly transforms into Kitty and finds clarity that she cannot be what Rob desires, the heart becomes the vibrant background not of couple-love, but of self-love as Kitty takes the center, backed by the brilliant heart (see Figure 5).

She does not draw herself topless to appease the audience. She draws herself topless because her toplessness expresses the blunt reality of developing breasts after having been assigned male at birth. With this shock comes clarity, as she realizes that is why she had "so many issues" with her body before then. This realization, the lightbulb moment if you will, sets up the scene for the realization that occurs when she is with Rob. Rob desires a man in their

relationship, but she knows she cannot be that for him. The realization that she wants to be seen as a woman in a relationship is the catalyst for loving herself.

Appearance and clothing is a critical component of Blaque's identity throughout this video. As indicated earlier, she shows us Matthew's middle school darkness by representing herself decked in hoodies and her face shadowed. We see college-age Matthew flaunt an aqua scarf, paint-splattered clothes, and a large red bag before transforming into Kitty, who wears a headscarf, flannel top, and shorts as a type of "uniform." When discussing her inability to be a man for Rob, Blaque specifically emphasizes that being a girl is tied to her clothing, as she erases the masculine attire of collared shirt and jeans and replaces them with a headscarf, a pink top, and smaller bottoms. A pattern begins to emerge:



*Figure 5. Blaque's progression to self-love.*

Outward appearance is closely related to Blaque's gender identity, and once she comes to terms with being a girl, she expresses herself with traditionally bright and feminine attire—

headscarves, bows, and headbands appear in her hair throughout the video. As her appearance becomes more feminine, she also becomes happier, for she draws herself smiling rather than frowning or neutral.

As indicated earlier, Blaque draws herself without clothes several times. The second time she shows herself semi-nude is when she mentions that as a junior in college she needed to start taking “’mones,” referring to hormones, such as spironolactone (an anti-androgen) and estrofem (an estrogen). This visual shows Blaque again at the center of the screen, clad in shorts and surrounded by the visual representations of spironolactone and estrofem—a pill bottle and a daily, circular pill pack, respectively. The animated Blaque smiles and she draws her body with relatively narrow hips and smaller breasts before detailing the effect of the hormones. “At about six months I really started to see the changes”—Blaque erases her breasts and draws them larger, plumping up her hips and thighs—“and I was finally really happy with the way that my body looked.” Finally, Blaque says that she finds comfort in her physical shape because it is more representative of her gender. I do not think Blaque is alluding that all girls should look like her self-drawing, but for her own identity this is what makes her most comfortable. The characteristics she takes on are key features that represent socially-defined femininity. In disrobing herself, Blaque takes comfort in her nakedness and uses it to empower her life-changing decisions.

While Blaque never mentions her gender before she tells us her adoptive parents named her Matthew, she uses masculine features in her visual representations of Matthew. By representing Matthew with “traditionally” masculine features (contrasted by her “feminine” acts, such as art—“a girl thing”), her choice to be naked during her breast development scene, then, is her removal of that initial masculinity.

Just as she has experienced what it means to present with masculine attributes, Blaque yields the ability to straddle the fine line between nakedness and nudity that Berger argues is mutually exclusive. She is not simply being “seen and judged as a sight” as Berger might argue (47). Rather, as the designer of her own video content—the editor that can shape her visual representation in any way she pleases—Blaque does not succumb to the singular representation of her identity. Her dynamic video, in which the representation of herself *acts*, functions in the same way that the narrative that is removed from Adam and Eve’s story functions: Lacking narrative, Adam and Eve’s story is shameful, and a sight for spectators (Berger 48-49). Instead, Blaque’s story harnesses the power originally held by Adam and Eve—unembarrassed and unashamed of her naked identity, because she has chosen to seize that identity and make it her own.

As a woman who is also trans, however, her story is not as simple as that of a cis-gender woman. How true this is of Blaque’s narrative, and true of many transgender voices that are berated with questions about their anatomy. Even this thesis spends significant time discussing Blaque’s animation of breast development. Blaque, as a woman, shows us a form that is traditionally feminine, but focused on her upper body. She does not show any drawing of the lower parts of her body, and it is due to this that she remains in control and untouched by our probing and questioning eyes.

Blaque’s agency is manifold. She removes some of this mystery by exposing her breasts. Additionally, she does not give the prying eyes of the viewers the entire view of her animated body. She retains that aspect, possibly because there are limitations on what body parts can be shown on YouTube, but also possibly because she knows the power inherent in keeping cis-

bodied eyes from seeing her entire physical form. It is this control that aids her in breaking the norm of traditional nude art.

While Blaque does present herself semi-nude from the frontal perspective, she is still the creator of her video and retains autonomy. She chooses to show those aspects of her body. And in the same way that Blaque allows spectators to gaze upon her drawn form, she removes it almost as quickly. Our ability to gaze at her changing body is fleeting. In the relationship between Blaque and her viewers, Blaque gains the most material power. If a creator chooses to monetize their video through Google AdSense advertisements, then the more views they receive the more chances ads will be played and clicked on by the audience.

Although money is powerful, perhaps the strongest part of Blaque's power rests in her ability to be what Berger considers "an exceptional nude in the European tradition" (57). Blaque is what Berger describes as "no longer nude"—her visual narrative is one that "break[s] the norms of the art form; [hers is a painting of a loved woman], more or less naked" (57). Who loves Blaque? Clearly her boyfriend, Nicholas, as she demonstrates at the conclusion of her narrative. But Blaque also loves herself, shown through the centering of her body and the heart that literally blooms behind her. As the painter, Blaque owns her own "objectified" body, as she can control what that body does or how that body appears on screen. In the words of Berger, the spectator "can witness their relationship—but he can do no more: he is forced to recognize himself as the outsider he is. He cannot deceive himself into believing that she is naked for him. The way the painter has painted her includes her will and her intentions in the very structure of the image, in the very expression of her body and her face" (58). While a woman being depicted nude in traditional art would strike Berger as being subjugated or objectified, Blaque retains her



agency because she is the animator/painter and her use of nudity confirms her identity—one which frequently is relegated and ignored in society.

Blaque's story, mimicking many of the other videos in the Draw My Life genre, ends on a high note. She is happy, eager to continue her journey with her loving boyfriend. And she emphasizes that, "For once in my life I can say with 100% certainty that I know who I am. And I'm really happy with who I've become." Her submission proves that the Draw My Life genre is a tool for marginalized voices to take back their agency. As Blaque states on her own website, "This is my platform. This is my story. And I will tell it how I please..."

## CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

## Implications

**Naming and visibility**

Blaque uses YouTube as a platform for her opinions but also her personal narrative, which has the potential to impact those searching for marginalized voices, whether they identify with her or not. While her Draw My Life could have been any video narrative on her channel, its inclusion in the Draw My Life tag associates it with the other DML videos, and subsumes it into that genre of YouTube video. Classifying her narrative through the tag brings up another important reason to justify genre classification—naming something is powerful.

In 1990, Sigrid King examines the cultural issue of naming, declaring, “Naming has always been an important issue in the Afro-American tradition because of its link to the exercise of power. From their earliest experiences in America, Afro-Americans have been made aware that those who name also control, and those who are named are subjugated” (683). She pulls in Walter Ong’s commentary on oral cultures and their inability to fathom and hold power without the ability to name: “Naming is tied to racial as well as individual identity” (683). We see this play out in Blaque’s journey from Matthew to Kitty to Kathryn to Kat.

My goal in pointing to this facet of the power of naming is not to give power to myself or any other critic, however. In fact, that is my last intent, as I am a white woman with privilege that Blaque and many other DML video contributors are not afforded. Instead, I encourage an examination of this naming aspect in terms of Blaque’s position. The video creators that host their content on YouTube created the DML tag. Regardless of who created the tag, its

pervasiveness to carry on from one video creator to the next allows those creators to hold the power in the creation of their art and their narratives. YouTube is simply a broadcast mechanism. Without its users and creators, it is not sustainable. By naming/tagging, Blaque is able to position herself within these narratives and control her story. Thus, DML video contributors empower themselves through the use of the tag.

YouTube in general is an important space for trans visibility and expression, and DML videos offer a familiar basis for narrative. The significance of YouTube as a tool, however, must not be overlooked. Though their visibility is important, too, the Caitlyn Jenners of the world cannot take the stage entirely for trans visibility. While privileged white trans people still face discrimination, the image and voice of the trans community cannot be someone with such *extreme* privilege. Jenner was warmly accepted and hailed a beauty icon, but the same response is not given to the majority of the trans community, which faces discrimination, abuse, and social injustice. These levels of privilege must be taken into account when giving marginalized voices a platform on which to speak. There is a problem with media choosing to broadcast a singular trans narrative repeatedly of someone who has no trouble affording health care, affording surgical procedures, or paying the bills. YouTube helps to counteract this problematic to give smaller voices the space they need to represent a marginalized community and the issues they may face.

### **Pedagogy and new media**

In “Cute Girl in Wheelchair—Why?” Rachel Reinke and Anastasia Todd discuss how marginalized identities use YouTube to “affectively disorient space online in order to create a physical presence of those who are excluded from normative understandings of ‘being’” (97). Though they focus primarily on Disability Studies, they acknowledge that Blaque is another

useful person to consider for pedagogical purposes in order to “allow...meaningful interaction to emerge from students’ affective responses [to shift marginalized] content so that it is intrinsically valued,” which will transform the marginalized voice into a normative voice (98). Instructors today already look to Blaque’s YouTube channel for pedagogical uses, but her DML submission in particular illustrates the various intersections of multimodal composition that are at the forefront of pedagogical instruction.

YouTube itself is a digital platform that presents opportunities for the public to engage in critique, education, expression, entertainment, and advocacy, though this list is not exhaustive. In “Haul, Parody, Remix,” Dubisar et al. advocate the rhetorical possibilities of student video remixing through the themes of “media misrepresentation and rape culture” and “anticapitalist criticism and feminist parody” (53). Emerging from their critique is the argument that instructors may “invite students to communicate their own intersectional identities and values through multimodal assignments, as the students here have done, remixing the possibilities for how and where students’ ideas can take shape and mobilize rhetorical criticism” (63). Dubisar et al.’s article does more than critique subversions of power, however. The student authors “subvert the tradition of professors writing about students” (53) by themselves taking on the critical role alongside Dubisar. What this research illustrates is the power of subverting traditional positions and what becomes available for rhetorical criticism and pedagogical studies from this subversion. Students’ use and understanding of digital platforms allows for new directions in feminist rhetorical criticism, as demonstrated by Dubisar et al.’s article.

Similarly, Brian Ray looks at remixes and genre theory’s recent foray into uptake in “More than Just Remixing.” Ray proposes that pedagogy should envision multimodality not as a class goal, but rather an extension that allows students greater mobility as they merge “into

public discourse” (184). He argues that “genres do not exist in isolation from one another. They engage in constant conversation and have material affects on one another” (185). Ray shows this by using video remixes to demonstrate the fluidity of genre interaction and their usefulness in pedagogy in teaching students to critique public discourse.

Pedagogy relies on new media now more than ever. Dubisar et al. and Ray demonstrate a trend in the pedagogical exploration of video remixing. As the genre of video remixing fosters rhetorical and communicative skills in students, so can the Draw My Life genre, if we allow student to utilize and critique its conventions and expectations.

### **Pedagogy and comics**

On a similar note, recent pedagogical studies have considered the benefits of using comics to teach composition. Kathryn Comer’s “Illustrating Praxis” advocates teaching student’s literacy through the composition of comics rather than simply reading comics. She writes, “Comics rely on more than just linguistic and visual modes of communication; they combine words and images with gestural, spatial, and even audio modes into a truly multimodal experience” (76). Her essay incorporates narrative theory to establish her emphasis “on the genre of graphic memoir” (76) and her assignment for students to compose their own comic narratives. Her observations of her students’ work composing via comics demonstrates “the core outcomes of critical literacy pedagogies,” including understanding how texts are constructed, “demonstrating rhetorical awareness both as a composer...and a reader of text,” and “developing agency as a communicator and as a reader” (99-100).

In “Film School for Slideware,” Fred Johnson combines the theories of visual communication theorists like Roland Barthes, and Scott McCloud’s theory of sequential art, to

investigate PowerPoint slide creation. He argues that sequential positioning of images allows students and slide users to create “more productive relationships between their audiences, their slides, and their rhetorical goals” (125). What his conclusion poses is a combination of theories which seek to make professional and student presentation slides more visually instructive and emotionally arresting.

Clearly, pedagogical studies find both video-sharing platforms and comics to be useful tools for students to become active creators not only in the classroom composition process, but in public discourse as well. With video creation and comics as the focal points, these pedagogical studies illustrate only a fraction of the uses of multimodal literacies, and they suggest the potential of blending sequential or comics with videography. The Draw My Life genre combines both sequential art and videography. Its form and function, I propose, is a useful tool for students to build the necessary skills in multimodal composition and rhetorical analysis.

### Limitations

One limitation of this analysis is that I examined only five DML videos in this thesis. A search for “draw my life” on YouTube yields over twenty-million results. My analysis, while I believe it accurately represents the DML genre as a whole and offers insight into narrative opportunities for marginalized voices, is limited by the number of videos in my consideration.

Additionally, my study is limited by the fact that I did not interview any of the creators of these videos to ask what their intents or hopes were in creating these videos. Given that I am a cis-gender white woman, I acknowledge that my perspective and analysis of Blaque’s video submission is limited and framed by my own privilege. I have tried to be sensitive to cultural

differences that I may not fully understand or have experience with, and it is my hope that future studies on intersectional identity narratives will take even better care.

Another limitation of my analysis is that it has the potential of falling into the trap Thomas M. Conley warned of in 1979, which is that excessive taxonomies become “tiresome and useless” (53). By considering Draw My Life videos a particular genre, they add to the pre-existing list of sub-genres of narrative and technology. Classifications breed more classifications. Is this classification a fault? I argue that it is not, because just as scientists use taxonomies to qualify and categorize biological organisms, critics have a desire to qualify and categorize the artifacts they examine. As Stine Lomborg says of the “cognitive need” to categorize, “Emergent texts mix genres at a high pace, genres intersect when user interactions unfold across genres, and new genres continuously emerge from combinations of existing genres” (51). To understand these genres, we have to classify them, and understand “how genres are configured, negotiated, stabilised, and possibly destabilised over time” (Lomborg 51).

As Miller and Shepherd note in their conclusion, “the blog is a rapidly moving target...and our analysis cannot presume to be complete or comprehensive” (15). Technology’s scope means that the vlog, and in this case the DML video, will change as a genre inevitably, and I, too, cannot presume an exhaustive analysis. Genres emerge rapidly. However, this inevitable change presents further opportunities for future research.

### Future Research and Summary

Students face the challenge of understanding and using evolving new media, thus I advocate that instructors use Draw My Life videos in their curriculums, both to show different narratives and to teach the process of composing in the genre. This particular genre, despite its

importance to community building and identity formation, is not researched or employed enough. Further areas of exploration in this topic include: a closer look at the changing policies of monetization and advertisement revenue for creators on YouTube; a similar study that examines other intersectional DML videos; and a wider analysis of the genre criteria to ensure my analysis is not overly presumptuous.

In closing, my thesis sought to prove that videos within the Draw My Life tag are a genre of their own that branches from that of the blog and its video counterpart, the vlog. What my analysis found was that DML videos do closely follow the criteria of blogs and vlogs, but they also utilize a distinctive narrative arc reminiscent of arcs found in literature. Kat Blaque's narrative cycles through a number of narrative arcs because she is extremely detailed and provides a fuller explanation of her experiences than that of the other videos examined here, but the simplicity of the other videos makes them no less significant.

Blaque chooses to illustrate her body as she wants us to see it. By adding her narrative, her viewers and listeners understand her choices, feelings, struggles, and triumphs, which allows her to control our perceptions of her. Blaque herself was outed in front of her friends, as are many trans people, and that is a risk that significantly impacts a trans person's life. She says herself that, "As a trans person, you oftentimes feel that your transness is going to ruin you" (Guerrero). Thus, she retains significant authority by deciding to control what we see at the same time as putting herself out there for the world to see. Still, her nudity transcends a traditional subjugated figure. She remains an agent of her own will, naked as a tool to inform, teach, and immortalize her experience. Blaque's video represents a powerful way for voices who are traditionally marginalized to use new media to share and preserve their identities and personal histories.



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